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ABSTRACT

The "climate of opinion" is the dominant direction of opinions and perceptions as expressed by existing or assumed activities of constituent individuals, groups, and institutions. There are three regional definitions of this concept: macrolevel, local level, and individual level. A model of climate of opinion contains the following features: (1) the climate of a higher level is a synthesis of lower level subclimates; (2) subclimate is a synthesis of the effects of the major structural factors of the subarea; and (3) the general climate of opinion covers several subclimates, each with its own individual, collective, and institutional levels. Communication, the cement holding organizations together, takes place in ways characteristic of each level. An opinion leader is of central importance at the individual level, newspaper and local electronic media are significant at the local level, and national mass media dominate the macrolevel. Macrolevel communication may influence the opinion formation of individuals directly and thus also influence the climates on the individual and local levels. (DF)

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THE STRUCTURE OF "CLIMATES OF OPINION" FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

by

Seppo Sisättö

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1. ON THE CONCEPT OF GENERAL CLIMATES OF OPINION

In political ecology, the concept of political climate has been given a precise meaning; the concept political climate is used to refer to the political orientation of citizens' opinions in a certain geographical region (see for example, SIEGFRIED 1913, V; PIETILÄ 1972, 52). The "measurement" of this climate is subsequently made possible by the results of various election situations or other expressions[2] of political opinion by the citizens of the region.

The use of the concept of climates[1] has not been limited to political ecology alone. Even researchers of popular opinion and of communication have been using "climate" terminology. Except for the study of political ecology, however, exact grounds (i.e. generally accepted definitions) have not been created in these research areas.

Tapani Valkonen, a Finnish researcher, has noted that resorting to "climate" terminology has taken place in contextual analysis, when one has not been sure of which factors together or separately, have caused certain effects on the activities of the members of a collective body (VALKONEN 1970, 11).

For research purposes, the use of such undefined terms is not informative. The term "climate", as it is used outside the field of political ecology, does not, when separa-

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[1] In addition to political climate, studies have referred to such things as climate of university studies and research, cultural climate, climate of defense, climates of opinion, socio-emotional climates etc. (DAVIS 1961; MICHAEL 1961; THELEN-WITHALL 1949; BROWN-FEIST 1977; SISÄTTÖ 1977a).

[2] Other measurable expressions are demonstrations, political strikes etc.

ted from its ecological context, give a sufficiently detailed discription of the factors, which are being used discussed or which are used as an explanation of certain phenomena.

For example, the study of the structure and central factors of the climate of university studies and research has produced a number of interesting observations (see MICHAEL 1961). The mapping out of the climate in one limited sub-area of social activities may, however, remain of secondary importance unless it is connected with a wider context: the macro-development of the society as a whole.

In the case of the climate of university studies and research, the question can thus be put in two ways:

1) what structural factors determine the climate of university studies and research,
2) how does the climate of university studies and research affect the society around it?

Similar questions may be put in the cases of other "sub-climates". Only after both of these questions have been asked one can focus on the character of "climate problems" from a wider angle of view.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a scheme to analyze the general structure of general climates of opinion, and the significance and function of the communication system within the structured system of climates. The aim is to create around the idea of multi-level communications, a coherent frame of reference for various general climates of opinion.

2. DEFINITION OF THE GENERAL CLIMATES OF OPINION

The following definition of "general climates of opinion" is

based on the idea that there are an innumerable amount of sub-climates of opinion which are different and exist on various levels.

> The comprehensive concept covering all the various sub-climates is here expressed by the term "general climate of opinion". This is understood as a dominant direction of opinions and/or perceptions, such as they are expressed by existing or assumed activities of individuals, collective bodies and institutions as well as out of the picture conveyed of it by the communication media (cf. LASSWELL 1965, 341). Thus it is a synthesis of several factors representing various dimensions.

As Renato Tagiuri notes, climate concepts in social sciences are artificial (TAGIURI 1968, 24). That, however, does not make them any less useful in explaining various phenomena. The main problem, above all, is in that when climate terminology is used to explain things, it in fact is not always clear what exactly is being used to explain phenomena. The researcher may have a distinct inner view on the matter but his definition of "climate" is insufficient or nonexistent.

The term "general climate of opinion" should be understood as a concept always containing three levels of activity: individual, collective and institutional. The expressions of opinions and/or perceptions, either real or assumed ones, affect the general climate of opinion.

We can further conclude that there are also numerous kinds of general climates of opinion - despite the fact that this term is used as a comprehensive one covering the various sub-climates. Thinking of it only as a single global, dominant direction of opinions and/or perceptions which would be a synthesis of corresponding national characteristics is not sensible.

The area covered by the general climate of opinion is best connected to include a nation or a large part of a nation. One can equally well, study the general climate of opinion of a certain group of nations, of a continent, or other such area.

It is difficult - perhaps even impossible - to separate completely the concept of climate from a geographical context. The matter might be approached from the point of view of the various levels of activity, separately from the context of geography, but it seems that one will in all cases end up with a definition of climate which is connected with a given area. On the other hand it can be noted that the point of view of the levels of activity will release the observer from the administrative borders of the areas.

In other words, from this point of departure, the term political climate, is no more bound to an administrative concept in terms of voting districts, but a given political climate may cover parts of several separate voting districts or constituencies. This problem of course does not concern the institutional level where small administrative areas may even be particularly suitable units for scrutiny[1]. On levels of collective bodies, however, it may be important to get rid of the approach by administrative areas.

3. A MODEL STRUCTURE OF GENERAL CLIMATES OF OPINION

In the analysis of general climates of opinion thus far,

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[1]This has in fact been true before in several studies of political ecology in which, for example, various areas of political climates of a nation have been explored. In such cases the smallest unit studied may be a municipality which in a nation-wide perspective, however, usually is a small area. In Finland this type of basic study has been made by Onni Rantala (e.g. RANTALA 1970).

a number of characteristics and assumed mechanisms have been found. Although the term general climate of opinion has been defined, the construction of the system of general climates of opinion in its entirety and the structures of individual sub-climates do not yet take exact shape on the basis of such a definition alone. The following is an attempt at defining these problems.

> One starts here from the assumption that general climates of opinion form a structure in which the climate of a higher level always is a synthesis of the general climates of opinion of the lower levels.

On the basis of such a concept of synthesis one may further continue towards defining the structure of sub-climates covered by the general climate of opinion.

> Sub-climate means a synthesis of the effects of the major structural factors in the sub-area in question within a given geographical area and/or within functional sectors of society.

The major structural factors of a sub-climate mean variables which cause changes in the opinions of the individuals concerning the sub-sector in question. By the major structural factors of a cultural climate, for example, according to the definition given, variables alters the opinions of the individuals of a culture to one direction or another (cf. SISÄTTÖ 1977a, 48).

> The general climate of opinion thus covers n pieces of sub-climates which each can have their own individual, collective and institutional levels.

In order to provide for the necessary regional point of view, the following presentation will utilize the concepts of macro level, local level and individual level.

Macro level general climate of opinion (such as political climate, general climate of opinion) means.

a certain general climate of opinion in a nation or in a large part of it.

Local level general climate of opinion means the general climate of opinion in an area smaller than that of macro level, such as an economic region, municipality, city or village.

Individual level general climate of opinion can be used to refer to the small group level and the general climate of opinion created by individials active on that level (cf. SISÄTTÖ 1977a, 50-51).

Table 1 presents an extract of the dimension of general climates of opinion. A simple model structure of general climates of opinion can be made on their basis as seen from the point of view of communication.

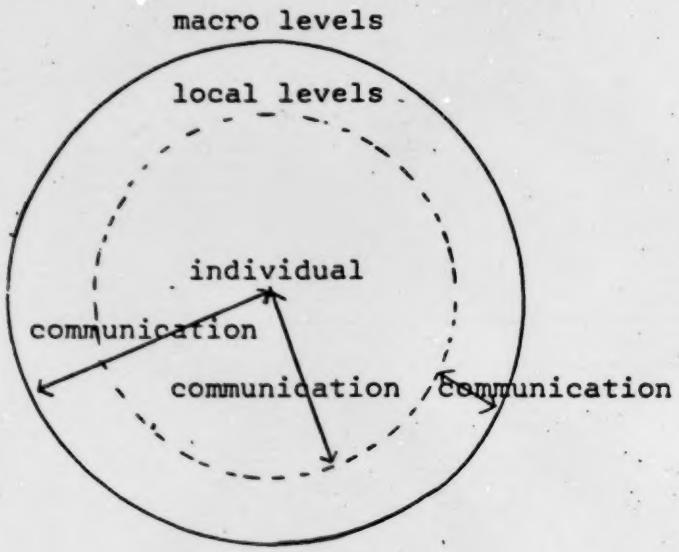

Figure 1. A model structure of general climates of opinion from the point of view of communications (cf. SISÄTTÖ 1977a, 50).

In the scrutiny of general climates of opinion so far, the significance of communication to the general climates of opinion has not been discussed. The model in figure 1 however fetches support from the central position of

communication in the system of general climates of opinion. The point of departure of the model is the relationship between an individual and the general climates of opinion around him. The closer to the center (to the individual) one is, the better an individual can influence the general climate of opinion around him. Conversely : the farther from the individual one goes, the smaller are his possibilities as an individual to influence the general climates of opinion.

4. COMMUNICATION AND GENERAL CLIMATES OF OPINION

Communication is a central cohesive factor in all human activity. As a point of departure for the scrutiny of the relationship between communication and general climates of opinion one can take Norbert Wiener's statement, "Communication is the cement that makes organizations" (DEUTSCH 1963, 77).

All small groups, collective bodies and institutions are composed of people (or rather, are results of their activity), the contents of the activity of which is in them expressed in the form of roles and role expectations. Here we however start from the fact that people in the decision-making organs of these organizations, act both as individuals and as representatives of their groups of reference (e.g. KEY 1974, 481-499). Thus the possibilities of an individual to influence the cource of things may be understood as usually being limited to his closest surroundings. Only as a selected representative of these surroundings may he have a wider influence.

On local levels of general climates of opinion the individual can be most influenced when he is together with those of the same opinion. Towards macro levels, representation must be seen from a wider angle: no longer

Table 1.

DIMENSION OF GENERAL CLIMATES OF OPINION

Levels of general climates of opinion		
Regional definition of level	Definition of activity of level	Elements of influence in general climates of
MACRO LEVEL (e.g. a state or a part of it)	INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL	parties, parliament, ministeries, cabinet, market organizations, universities, etc. (sometimes even factors outside the institutions themselves)
LOCAL LEVEL (e.g. municipality, city, village, etc.)	COLLECTIVE LEVEL	party locals, municipal councils, municipal authorities, boards of direction, associations, media, etc.
INDIVIDUAL LEVEL (small group level)	INDIVIDUAL LEVEL	family, working group, friends, communication

a representation of people of exactly the same opinion or from the same area, but rather as a representation of people thinking or acting generally in the same way (cf. NORDAHL-WEIBULL 1977, 9-11).

On communication at various levels of climates[1]

Climates of each level communicate in ways characteristic to them. In communication on the individual level one may say that the so called opinion leaders have a central importance (BERELSON 1966, WIIO 1973, 68-112). An opinion leader is a person who has connections and contacts to people with a central influence in the general climates of opinion at local levels. His activity can be regarded as that of an intermediary between the individual and local levels.

Newspaper, regional radio and television can be regarded as the most important media on local levels. Their status may accordingly be scrutinized through their function as filters between the individual and macro levels. They select information from macro level events and often place it in a local perspective - that of their central coverage - and at the same time support the stability of regional general climates of opinion (cf. SISÄTTÖ 1977a, 53-58).

Nationwide programs of television and radio dominate the macro level communication in present communication systems. One must remember, however, that a difference has to be made between macro level media and macro level communica-

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[1] This topic has been discussed by the author in his paper presented at the ICA conference in West Berlin in 1977 under the title, "Political Climate and Communication" (SISÄTTÖ 1977b).

tion. Macro level communication has naturally existed before the media of that level. i.e. before radio and television. Even newspapers are of importance in macro level communication, in cases where their coverage is nationwide. Several countries, in fact, have newspapers or magazines with a nationwide coverage.

The above classification of media according to the various levels may be ragarded as a rather categorical one, since partial overlapping could be pointed out which exceeds the classification given. On the other hand, it must be remembered that the climates themselves cannot be exactly attributed to the various levels either, but that there will always be some overlapping. This problem can, however, be ragarded as a secondary one. The following further differentiation is therefore based on the same categorical classification of media according to levels of climates.

The effect of communication on general climates of opinion

In the above discussion of communication on the various levels of climates, reference was already made to two phenomena: first , it was noted that opinion leaders act as intermediaries between local levels and the individual and secondly, that local level media could be seen as filters between the macro and individual levels.

Communication has so far, in this paper, been construed as a one-way, downwards-oriented phenomenon. It must be borne in mind that feedback elements which belong to the process of communication effect, on their part, a reverse direction of communication (cf. MARVICK 1973, 723; MALETXKE 1963, 38-41). Representation and communication between the representative and the one represented

which is connected to this, is in a central position in communication process occurring in an upward direction. On the other hand it can be assumed that mass communication in a downward direction, if it works well, can satisfy a major part of the need for communication between the elected representative and the electors (cf. SISÄTTÖ 1977a, 56).

It has been found by scientists that television possibly is more affective than other media in forming the opinions of people (BLUMLER 1975; NOELLE-NEUMANN 1976).

Television (and radio) as a macro level communication medium, offers people living in different parts of the country and in different local climates, the same basic information on macro level events or local level events with a wide scope of interest, to be used as a basis for opinion formation. This may be assumed as causing, with time, pressures at local levels with tendencies towards orientation in a direction parallel with that of the macro level. At least in some parts, then, the climate of opinion of the macro level may dominate the climates of local levels. This possibility of influence of macro level media brings forward a new angle:

> General climates of opinion, due to the influence of television (and partly also that of radio) are not necessarily only built in an upward direction; the macro level general climate of opinion may influence the opinion formation of individuals directly and thus also influence the climates on the individual and local levels (figure 2).

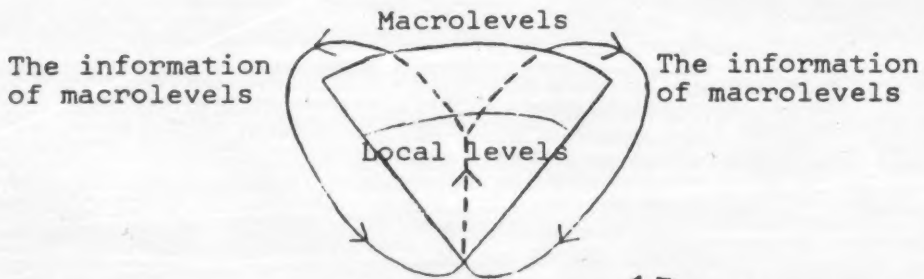

Figure 2.

The assumption of the direction of construction of general climates of opinion being switched around to happen in a downward direction as a particular result of the influence of television, is not necessarily in conflict with the assumption of the construction of climates presented above. In fact it can be assumed that the effects of information directed downwards are stabilized in the process of formation of the general climates of opinion which happens in an upward direction (cf. SISÄTTÖ 1977a, 57).

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper has been to create a frame of reference for various general climates of opinion, starting from points of view of communications. One has in fact been dealing with an analysis of the function of society and the various communication phenomena essentially connected with it, on a relatively general level. The result is a frame of reference which, despite its many deficiencies, could be a useful starting point for a number of further considerations.

As social scientists continuously refer to "climate" terminology in order to explain phenomena, one cannot remain indifferent to how these terms are used and how they are understood. It is more sensible to see the sub-climates as parts of a larger system, than to regard them as separate phenomena having no connection to the whole.

In spite of their seeming differences, various general climates of opinion contain common structural elements. The further analysis of these factors is already a wide field of study: so is the study of the filter hypotesis

presented[1]. The major structural factors of the general climate of opinion also make an interesting subject for analysis, in particular as it may be assumed that the importance of such major structural factors varies when considered with reference to the time dimension. Evidently, the major structural factors are different at different times.

There is further cause to emphasize two basic questions:

1) what structural factors constitute general climates of opinion.
2) how sub-climates affect the society around them?

It can be assumed that, for example, cultural climates vary a lot from one region to another. How great is the effect on such variation, of differences in the activities of regional cultural institutions etc.

Until the present time, plenty of research reports have been obtained on various general climates of opinion. By simply approaching them as a totality one may already gain more information on questions raised by the present paper, without having to collect furth material.

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[1]Local level communication as a filter between macro and individual levels.

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